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ABSTRACT

Although the sexual climate in the United States appears to have changed, there is substantial documentation which indicates that parents are reluctant to talk with their children about sexual matters. This review of the literature indicates that now, as 30 years ago, the primary source of sexual information among preadolescents is peers. Studies from 1943-1979 are cited, including the work of Kinsey, Thornburg, and Pomeroy. Among the 22 citations are books, journal articles, and pamphlets. The review is organized around four major topics: (1) Peers Not Parents Serve as Sex Educators; (2) Lack of Communication is Disastrous; (3) Barriers to Sex Talks Between Parents and Children; and (4) Miscommunication When Parents Attempt to be Sex Educators. (AG)

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SEX EDUCATION AND SEMANTIC PITFALLS

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In our changing society, one facet that seems to be changing with incredible speed is the sexual climate. Unfortunately, while many sexual norms are being bent or broken, one norm remains unchanged. There is still a steadfast reluctance among parents to talk about sexuality with their children. In 1948 Kinsey reported that most children obtained their sexual information from their peers. Incredible as it may seem, there exists substantial documentation to support the contention that things have not changed much in the last thirty years. Thornburg provides repeated examples of studies that show the primary source of sexual information and knowledge of preadolescents comes from peers: Elias and Gebhard, 1969; Lee, 1952; Ramsey, 1943; Schwartz, 1969; Thornburg, 1970, 1972.[1]

PEERS NOT PARENTS SERVE AS SEX EDUCATORS

What follows is a brief delineation of numerous studies all of which demonstrate the lack of effective communication between parents and children about sexuality. The results of a 1969 Psychology Today questionnaire which included over 20,000 responses show that less than one-tenth of the men and one-sixth of the women received most of their sex education from their parents. Rather, "two-thirds of the men and half of the women said that friends had been the major source."[2] Thornburg in 1974 engaged in a comparative analysis of initial sex information sources among preadolescents in Arizona and Oklahoma. The results indicate that only 20% of the students received information from their parents and 19% of these communicated with their mothers, leaving the fathers with an almost unnoticeable 1.8%. After reviewing the literature, Michael Schofield was lead to conclude that approximately 2/3's of the males and 1/4 of the females learn nothing about sex from their parents. This prompted him to write, "If we had to rely on our parents to educate us about sex, most of us would still be waiting."[3]

LACK OF COMMUNICATION IS DISASTROUS

It seems pertinent at this point to ask why a lack of open communication in the home about sexuality even matters. It matters very much because adolescents are either remaining ignorant or gaining misinformation from their peers. The lack of accurate information results in severe negative consequences which will briefly be outlined below.

Ill-informed adolescents experimenting with sexuality create some astounding statistics. In 1978, c . out of every five babies born in the U.S. was born to a mother who was not yet seventeen![4] "Specifically, out-of-wedlock births have increased by 75% among younger adolescents and 33% among 18-19 year olds in the last decade according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976."[5] Alfred Moran, executive vice president of Planned Parenthood in New York City notes that the pregnancy rate among teenagers in New York is eight times higher than the reported VD rate.[6] Moreover, of the teenagers who experienced unwanted pregnancies, only 13-16% were using any contraception.[7] Admittedly, it is difficult for parents to talk to their children about sexuality and particularly about contraception. However, as Uslander points out, "not talking about birth control does not help children any more than not telling them to look both ways before they cross the street."[8]

Having established that most parents do not talk with their children about sexuality and that this lack of communication is harmful, we come to the heart of this paper. This paper is an attempt to analyze from a semantic perspective what barriers exist between parents and their children when it comes to sex talks. First, there will be a discussion of what barriers prevent parents from talking about sexuality at all, and secondly, a consideration of the semantic pitfalls that can create miscommunication when sex talks are attempted.

BARRIERS TO SEX TALKS BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

One of the most common excuses parents give for not talking to their children about sexuality is that the children are not ready to hear about such matters. Thus, even if children dare to ask questions, parents respond with admonitions like, "Wait until you are older." The communication barrier is caused by a frozen evaluation. Parents falsely assume that their children are not changing and growing up. They assume that the children are too young to understand the facts of life. While this evaluation may have been accurate when the children were very young, they are now inappropriately applying this past evaluation to the present and even the future.[9]

This is a problem that can occur from the child's perspective also. Many teenagers engage in a retroactive frozen evaluation. They assume that their parents were never young and never had to face some of the issues and sexual confusion that they now encounter. Thus, they freeze their present viewpoint of their parents as "asexual beings" and inappropriately apply this evaluation to the past. It is inconceivable that mom and dad were ever young and faced with the sexual pressures they are now struggling with. If both parents and children deny each other's sexuality, then obviously, they should have little to talk about.

Dr. Gordon Shipman, Chairman of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Wisconsin State University, Stevens Point, speculates about the barriers that inhibit family communication about sexuality. On the basis of survey of 400 university students, he concluded that one factor contributing to this norm of silence is a mutual denial of the personal sexuality of both the parents and the children.[10] The irony is that parents are not even consistent in their evaluation of their children's comprehension level. While parents maintain that their children are too young to understand sexual

information, they nevertheless give complicated answers to questions the child may raise about less threatening topics. Many parents who would not hesitate to answer questions about gravity, electricity, or the solar system, deal with questions about sexuality in a totally different manner. Pomeroy gives the following illustration:

> "How are babies born?" is certainly no harder for a parent to answer than "What is lightning and why does it thunder?" The mechanics, at least, of conception are no harder for a child to grasp than the discharge of electricity between positive and negative poles creating the air vacuum that ends in thunder. Yet parents attempt the latter and shrink from the former, too often because their own sex education was either scanty or non-existent. The questions are really no different; we only make them so. A common parental copout is that the inquiring child is too young to understand the great "mystery" of conception and birth; the implication is that he is never too young to understand meteorological phenomena like lightning and thunder.[11]

Thus we can see that parental ignorance and the belief (frozen evaluation) that children are not old enough to understand the facts of life both function as barriers to effective communication about sexuality.

Still another barrier to effective communication between parents and children arises from indiscrimination. Often there is a long standing norm passed down from parents to children that sexuality should not be talked about. This norm may start when children are small and are taught not to refer to certain parts of their body in front of company. But it may soon become a hard and fast rule or as Haney puts it, the result may be a "hardening of the categories."[12] Sexuality falls into the category of topics not openly or easily discussed. It is simply not talked about in any context in the family.

This norm becomes aggravated even further when one looks at organized religion and the polarization that occurs there. Too often, religions and religious writers have painted a negative, distorted view of sexuality. One distortion that has been promoted by religious writers is the false dichotomy

or polarization between the body and the soul. Rather than viewing physical and spiritual matters on a continuum, they are seen as contradictories with the body being totally evil and the soul totally good. Thus, one is admonished to flee from bodily pleasures and desires, focussing primarily, if not solely on spiritual matters. Since, sexuality obviously focuses on the body, it has been associated with sin and guilt. St. Thomas Aquinas in 1250 emphasized the holiness of man's spirit as opposed to the sinfulness of the body by proclaiming that "Marriage without sex is more holy than marriage with sexual intercourse." He is also noted for saying "He who loves his own wife too ardently is an adulterer."[13]

In the light of this tradition, is it any wonder that homes where formal religion plays a major role are also homes that tend to provide a more limited amount of sex education? What happens when these parents do attempt to communicate with their children about sexuality? The content of the communication is slanted in the direction of prohibitions, threats, and moral advice rather than being oriented toward needed information. Judith Rubenstein explored this topic in her dissertation in which she compared students in the Boston Public Schools with several Catholic schools. She administered a Sex Education Vocabulary Checklist to ninth graders in these schools and concluded that students in the Catholic schools had approximately twice as many unknown words per student as did the students in the public schools. Thus, the dichotomy between evil flesh and pure soul seems to have resulted in less education about sexuality.

Moreover, she then went on to examine 30 trade books on sex education for junior high school students. She first analyzed the tone of each book and classified it as either: impartial, having moral overtones, or containing Christian moral overtones. After having classified the books, she proceeded to analyze the content according to an information rating form. She concluded

that the books with Christian moral overtones contained less than half as much information as the other books.[14] While parents may feel that they are telling their children all they need to know about sex, they are in fact nowhere approaching allness in their conveying of sexual information. Rather, there is an extreme bit of abstraction going on. The books are focusing on moral values and Christian standards while neglecting to explain much basic information about human sexuality.

In conclusion, religiously oriented parents may feel inhibited about providing sex education through parent-child conversations and may turn to religiously oriented sex education books, only to find that these too are inadequate since they engage in high levels of abstraction. If the parents are unaware they are abstracting, nothing will be done to correct the situation. In this case, if the parents feel the books they have provided for their children are adequate, little more in the way of sex education may be provided, leaving the children with a dangerous lack of knowledge.

Probably the strongest deterrent to effective communication between parents and children about sexuality is the English language itself. We have no neutral words to use when talking about sexuality. Parents overwhelmingly admit to feeling uptight, embarrassed and uncomfortable about broaching the subject of sexuality with their children. A large part of this uneasiness comes from the negative connotations of the words themselves. Words are very powerful symbols which can elicit intensely emotional responses. Words cause people to giggle, blush, laugh nervously, or show anxiety. Even after students have taken a course on human sexuality, the words still can pose a threat. "To talk sex," says Dr. Neubeck (U. of Minn.) "is still to be a sinner."[15] This negative affect is compounded by the limited range of words available to us

to talk about sexuality. Effective sexual vocabularies do not exist. If one uses euphemisms, that is only emphasizing the unwritten norms that sex cannot be talked about in open, direct terms. About the only other options are scientific, medical words or street language which is viewed as obscene.[16] To use scientific, technical language while perhaps diminishing the negative affect, is not creating a positive affect, but at best a neutral detachment.

MISCOMMUNICATION WHEN PARENTS ATTEMPT TO BE SEX EDUCATORS

Thus far, we have looked at barriers to communication between parents and children. We have seen that minimal communication may be due to such factors as: frozen evaluations, indiscrimination, religious polarization, religious abstraction in sex education books, and the negative associations attached to most sexual terms. Now, let us look at some of the communication breakdowns that occur even when parents or peers attempt to discuss sexuality.

One of the most common causes of misinformation among children results from a confusion between fact and inference. Left to their own devices, children may overhear conversations, talk with peers, ask questions, and from these sources gain enough information to draw some interesting but inaccurate inferences about human sexuality. One example is cited by Margaret Mead in Blackberry Winter. Recalling her girlhood, she explains a faulty inference she made. Knowing that intercourse was necessary for conception, she then sought to figure out why intercourse took place with greater frequency and finally decided that the father's role was essentially a feeding role, and that many acts of intercourse were necessary to build up the baby which was composed of father's semen and mothers blood.[17] It seemed a perfectly natural explanation for how the baby got nourished since that seemed to be the most direct channel to the baby.

Another example of confusing fact and inference is given by Brenton when he cites a conversation between a mother and a son. Parents often assume that they know their children so well they can read their thoughts. Thus, when a child asks a question, parents interpret the question without even double-checking to see if they understood the intent of the question. Daniel was a thirteen year old troubled by his lack of aggressiveness. When he asked his mother if there is something wrong with him because he is not as tough as his peers, the mother jumps to the conclusion that she knows what is bothering her son. She therefore responds along the lines of, "Don't worry about it. You're not gay. Men can be sweet and kind, too." The mother's false inference, suddenly leads the son to think that he must be acting strange or his mother would not be talking about his possible homosexuality. By jumping to an inference, she then created numerous additional inferences in her son's mind along with a significant amount of anxiety.[18] Since sexuality is not something that is easily talked about, abrupt conversations often lead to unnecessary confusions between fact and inference. No one feels comfortable enough to check out their inferences and confusion abounds.

Miscommunication can also occur when parents and peers, deliberately or unintentionally give children inaccurate maps for the territory or the reality of human sexuality. Frequently, children will accept this false information since they see no need to question the information or take an extensional approach and check it out. They are receiving the information from individuals they know and they assume that an intensional approach is sufficient. So they trust the maps and ignore the reality. Consider some of the following examples. Parents often answer their children's questions about reproduction

with a fairy tale. Thus kids are told that storks bring babies, babies come from the doctor's bag, are bought in stores, or are baked in the oven and therefore people come out in different colors depending on how long they were left in the oven.[19]

Friends are a great source of inaccurate maps. Some of the conclusions current among adolescents are: All you have to do is take one birth control pill and you won't get pregnant.[20] Or, girls can only get pregnant right after their period. The rest of the time you are safe.[21] Finally, there is a long standing misconception that girls can't get pregnant the first time. Everyone gets one freebie. This substantiated by Dr. Neubardt, a gynecologist who reports conversations with young women who come seeking birth control after they have had intercourse at least once. One young lady confessed to not using any birth control but defended herself by saying, "You know, I haven't exactly been sleeping around. I've only had sex once. It'd be pretty rotten luck to get pregnant the first time you had sex." Neubardt was appalled and responded, "How could those sperm know it was her first time?"[22] Thus, regardless of the emphasis sexuality is receiving in the mass media, many students have inaccurate maps that do not prepare them for the realities of a pregnancy.

A related problem occurs when parents confuse symbolic maps with actual territories. Many parents refuse to talk with their children about sexuality (or consciously omit certain topics like contraception) because they feel if they provide the maps or the labels, the children will immediately go out and explore the territory. They fail to realize that giving their children accurate maps may actually prevent the child from exploring the territory or at least give the child an accurate idea of how sexuality operates and what the consequences of exploring the territory might be. Nevertheless, the oft repeated

fear of parents is that if they communicate with their children about sexuality, this will simply put ideas into the child's head and stimulate them to experiment to satisfy their curiousity. This is a myth that needs to be exposed.

Coombs in his survey of over 125 physicians and marriage counselors asked if "sex education would reduce inhibition and increase experimentation." The overwhelming response was "no" with only 6% agreeing with the statement.[23] Current research shows that just the opposite is true:

> the more knowledgeable a person is about sexuality, the less likely he or she is to engage in early sexual intercourse, or in irresponsible sexual behavior, such as having intercourse without contraception (Shah, Zelnik, and Kantner, 1975; Miller and Simon, 1974; Lewis, 1973; Kantner and Zelnik, 1972; Crist, 1970; Elias and Gebhard, 1969).[24]

Thus, ignorance is more likely to encourage sexual experimentation than information. Education tends to make youth cognizant of all the complex factors and responsibilities to consider before engaging in sexual experimentation.

The final pattern of miscommunication is the problem of bypassing. Since words have more than one denotative meaning and a myriad of connotative or associative meanings, bypassing is a relatively frequent occurrence. Consider some of the following examples of how children misinterpreted what they were told by their parents or what they overheard from peer or adult conversations. Small children have reported the following misconceptions.

> Mommies and daddies get babies from hugging and kissing. I'm not going to let anyone hug and kiss me. A baby starts to grow from a seed in a lady's tummy. I ate a bunch of pumpkin seeds on Halloween. I hope I'm not going to have a baby soon. I heard that a dog can get pregnant when she's "in heat." If it's the same with people, I'm going to spend the summer in the shade.[25]

Thus, one can see that even if parents want to talk with their children about sexuality, miscommunication can occur due to: a confusion between fact and inference, an intensional orientation which results in children following the wrong maps, or purposely being given the wrong maps (e.g. the stork), a

confusion of the map with the territory, and bypassing.

Having seen that a lack of family communication about sexuality results in severe societal problems such as premarital pregnancies, it appears that sex education needs to be provided somewhere. One solution might be the schools where trained educators can help to reduce the barriers and misconceptions. Yet one need only look at the number of state legislatures and local communities opposed to sex education classes in the schools to realize that many parents will adamantly fight the concept of anyone (even a trained professional) trying to teach their children about sexuality. Parents themselves, fall into the trap of becoming polarized on this issue. They choose very persuasive acronyms for their anti-sex education organizations such as:

MOMS--Mothers Organized for Moral Stability
PURE--Parents United for Responsible Education
POSSE--Parents Opposed to Sex and Sensitivity Education
POPE--Parents for Orthodoxy in Parochial Education
PRIDE--Parents and Residents Interested in Decent Education[26,27]

Reading the literature arguing either for or against sex education in the schools, one becomes glaringly aware of the ways language can be used to stereotype, create divisions, and capitalize on fear.

We are a long way from having solved the problems of lack of communication about sexuality. We need to stop avoiding the problem, start developing awareness of it, and the role that language plays in this critical area. If individuals are unable to face the existence of the problem and try to overcome it, then sex will remain a "dirty" word, miscommunication will continue, and the cycle of avoidance will be perpetuated. If this generation cannot be open with teenagers about sex, the norm will be set for the next generation to feel just as inhibited about talking about human sexuality with their families. And so the cycle continues while individuals and society as a whole pay the price.

NOTES

[1]Herschel Thornburg, "Educating the Preadolescent about Sex," The Family Coordinator, 23 Jan. 1974, p. 36.

[2]Morton Hunt. Sexual Behavior in the 1970's (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1974), p. 121.

[3]Michael Schofield, "The Sexual Behavior of Young People," in Sex Education: Rationale and Reaction, ed. Rex S. Rogers, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 186.

[4]Melvin Zelnik and John F. Kantner, "Contraceptive Patterns and Premarital Pregnancy among Women aged 15-19 in 1976," Family Planning Perspectives, 10 May/June, pp. 135-142.

[5]Patrick C. McKendry, Lynda Henley Walters and Carolyn Johnson, "Adolescent Pregnancy: A Review of the Literature," The Family Coordinator, 28 Jan. 1979, p. 17.

[6]"New PPNYC Teen Program: 2 Year, $4 Million Program to Help Teenagers Avert Unwanted Pregnancies," Family Planning Digest, 3 Nov. 1974, p. 8.

[7]"Further Conclusions of Teen Study Data," Getting it Together... 4 July 1974, p. 1.

[8]Arlene S. Uslander, Caroline Weiss and Judith Telman. Sex Education for Today's Child: A Guide for Modern Parents (New York: Association Press, 1977), p. 202.

[9]William V. Haney. Communication and Interpersonal Relations. Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, 1979, p. 449.

[10]Gordon Shipman, "The Psychodynamics of Sex Education," The Family Coordinator, 17 Jan. 1968, p. 3.

[11]Wardell B. Pomeroy. Your Child and Sex: A Guide for Parents (New York: Delacorte Press, 1974), p. 125.

[12]Haney, p. 387.

[13]Rev. Robert Carswell, "Historical Analysis of Religion and Sex," Journal of School Health, 39 Dec. 1969, p. 679.

[14]Judith Rubenstein, "A Comparison Between Student Interest and Book Information in Sex Education for Teenagers," DA, 35 (1975), 5153A (Harvard).

[15]Myron Brenton. Sex Talk (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Crest Book, 1972) p. 15.

[16]Sam Wilson, Byran Strong, Leah Miller Clarke and Thomas Johns. Human Sexuality: A Text with Readings (New York: West Publishing Co., 1977), p. 252.

[17]Anne Bernstein. The Flight of the Stork (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978), p. 7.

[18]Brenton, p. 166.

[19]Uslander, p. 9.

[20]Uslander, p. 202.

[21]Shirley Arnold and Arthur Hoffman, "Chicago Planned Parenthood's Teen Scene: A sociological Study for Participants," Adolescence, 9 Fall, 1974, p. 371.

[22]Selig Neubardt, "Observations of a Practicing Gynecologist," in Sexuality: A Search for Perspective, ed. Donald L. Grummon and Andrew M. Barclay, (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1971), p. 3.

[23]Robert Coombs, "Sex Attitudes of Physicians and Marriage Counselors," The Family Coordinator, 2 July 1971, p. 272.

[24]Peter Scales and Kathleen Everly, "A Community Sex Education Program for Parents," The Family Coordinator, 26 Jan. 1977, p. 40.

[25]Uslander, p. 9.

[26]Mary Breasted. Oh! Sex Education (New York: Praeger Pub., 1970), p. 5.

[27]Richard Kerckhoff and The Family Coordinator Family Life Education Reaction Panel, "Community Experiences with the 1969 Attack on Sex Education," The Family Coordinator, 19 Jan. 1970, p. 105.

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